

Message Text

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 00883 01 OF 02 241354Z

ACTION NEA-10

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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 COLOMBO 883

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT CLOSES ALL SCHOOLS FOR TWO DAYS

1. SUMMARY.ON FEBRUARY 22, THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED CLOSURE
OF ALL SCHOOLS ON THE ISLAND FOR TWO DAYS, FEBRUARY 23 AND
24. THIS ORDER DOES NOT APPLY TO UNIVERSITIES. GOVERNMENT'S
ACTION WAS A PREVENTIVE MEASURE DESIGNED TO HEAD OFF
POSSIBILITY OF VIOLENCE THAT MIGH HAVE BEEN ENGENDERED BY
STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE ABOLITION OF
STANDARDIZATION. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE HINTED AT A
PLOT TO OVERTHROW THEGOVERNMENT AS JUSTIFICATION FOR ITS
ACTION.WHILE THIS MAY BE AN EXAGGERATION, THE ISSUE IS
SO HEAVILY FREIGHTED WITH COMMUNAL IMPLICATIONS THAT
UNSCRUPULOUS ULTRA-NATIONALISTS IN THE OPPOSITION ARE MAKING
THE MOST OF THE ISSUE TO GENERATE DIFFICULTIES FOR THE
GOVERNMENT.IN FACT, THERE ARE NO REPORTS

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PAGE 02 COLOMB 00883 01 OF 02 241354Z

OF VIOLENCE AND THE COUNTRY APPEARS CALM. END SUMMARY.

2. BACKGOUND.

ONE OF THE UNP GOVERNMENT'S FIRST ACTS ON COMMING TO POWER
WAS TO DO AWAY WITH THE SYSTEM OF STANDARDIZATION, A
SYSTEM WHICH ALLOWED STUDNETS FROM DISADVANTAGED AREAS TO

ENTER UNIVERSITIES WITH A LOWER MARK THAN THAT REQUIRED FOR OTHER STUDENTS. THE SYSTEM PROVIDED GREATER OPPORTUNITIES FOR SINHALESE STUDENTS TO ENTER UNIVERSITIES VIS A VIS TAMIL STUDNETS, WHO TRADITIONALLY DID EXTREMELY WELL ON THE GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION-ADVANCED (GCE-A) EXAMS AND GAINED A DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF THE LIMITED UNIVERSITY PLACES.

3. WHEN THE RESULTS OF THE FIRST GCE-A LEVELS SINCE ABOLITION OF STANDARDIZATION WERE ANNOUNCED IN NONVEMBER 1977, OF THOSE WHO QUALIFIED FOR UNIVERSITY ADMISSION SIXTY-FIVE PERCENT WERE TAMIL. (TAMILS CONSTITUTE ABOUT 22 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION; SINHALESE 68 PER-CENT.) THERE WERE INDICATIONS AT THE TIME THAT PRESSURES WOULD BUILD UP FROM SINHALESE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (MPS), SCHOOLS, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS TO REINTRODUCE STANDARDIZATION. SINHALESE GENERALLY BELIEVE THAT SINCE TAMIL TEACHERS GRADE EXAMS WRITTEN IN TAMIL THEY ARE MORE GENEROUS IN GRADING TAMIL STUDENTS THAN TEACHERS ARE IN GRADING SINHALESE STUDENTS. HOWEVER, ONCE HAVING MET ONE OF THE TAMIL UNITED LIBERATION FRONT\$ (TULF) DEMANDS FOR EQUALITY FOR TAMILS BY DOING AWAY WITH STANDARDIZATION, THE GOVERNMENT COULD NOT BACK DOWN WITHOUT THE RISKS OF FUELING A RENEWAL OF COMMUNAL RESENTMENT ON THE TAMIL SIDE.

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PAGE 03 COLOMB 00883 01 OF 02 241354Z

4. FACED WITH THE GROWING PRESSURES FROM Irate SINHALESE AND FEARFUL OF REINSTITUTING STANDARDIZATION, THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATON EQUIVOCATED FOR SEVERAL MONTHS AND DIDNOT ANNOUNCE THE SELECTION OF NEW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. THEY STILL HAVE NOT BEEN ANNOUNCED. THIS FOSTERED FEELING OF UNCERTAINTY AMONG PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS, THEIR PARENTS, AND SCHOOL OFFICIALS. ADDING TO THIS UNCERTAINTY WERE ARTICLES IN THE SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP) NEWSPAPERS AND BUDDHIST TRACTS ARGUING FOR THE REINSTITUTION OF STANDARDIZATION. ARDENT SINHALESE NATIONALISTS REPORTEDLY HAVE BEEN ORGANIZING AROAND THE COUNTRY ON THIS ISSUE. IRRESPONSIBLE ELEMENTS IN THE OPPOSITION SLFP AND LEFT PARTIES SEE THIS AS A PROMISING ISSUE WITH WHICH TO EMBARRASS THE GOVERNMENT. GIVEN THE RECENT COMMUNAL OUTBURST IN AUGUST LAST, THIS AGITATION COULD LEAD TO VERY INCENDIARY RESULTS.

5. THE SCHOOLS

GOVERNMENT CLAIMS OF A POLITICAL PLOT NOTWHITHSTANDING, THERE IS UNREST AMONG SINHALESE STUDENTS AND OTHERS BECAUSE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S HESTIANCY IN ANNOUNCING THE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE SELECTIONS. THERE WAS AMOVEMENT

FOR A BOYCOTT INSTIGATED BY NON3STUDENTS, BUT THE CIRCULARS REFERRED TO BY THE POLICE WERE DISTRIBUTED LATE, INDICATING A HASTY DECISION TO MOUNT A BOYCOTT. ONE CIRCULAR CALLED FOR AN 8:00 A.M. TO 4:00 P.M. SATYAGRAHA ON FEBRUARY 24 DURING WHICH STUDENTS WOULD FAST AND ENGAGE IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN ORDER TO ENLIGHTEN THE MASSES ON THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY ABOLISHING STANDARDIZATION. HOWEVER, STANDARDIZATION SHOULD NOT BE HARMFUL TO ANY ETHNIC GROUP AND SHOULD PROTECT THE TAMILS. THE CIRCULAR SPECIFICALLY STATED THE SATYAGRAHA SHOULD NOT BE TRANSFORMED TO A COMMUNAL STRUGGLE. IT ALSO WARNED AGAINST POLITINAL ELEMENTS TAKING ADVANTEAGE AND ASKED STUDENTS TO CONDEMN ANY ATTEMPTS TO CRITICIZE THE GOVERNMENT.

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PAGE 04 COLOMB 00883 01 OF 02 241354Z

6. OTHERS INTERESTED IN THIS ISSUE WERE FAR LESS RESTRAINED AND ANYONE KNOWING HOW EXPLOSIVE THIS ISSUE IS CAN BE EXPECTED TO HAVE LOOKED FORWARD TO AT LEAST SOME DISORDERS WHICH WOULD HAVE WORKED TO THE DISADVANTAGE OF THE INCUMBENT GOVERNMENT WHICH HAS SOUGHT TO ELIMINATE A MAJOR TAMIL GRIEVANCE.

7. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

ON FEBRUARY 22, THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNNED THAT ALL SCHOOLS WOULD BE CLOSED FOR THE FOLLOWING TWO DAYS. THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION CLAIMED THAT PERSONS POLITICALLY OPPOSED TO THE GOVERNMENT, MOTIVATED SOLELY BY A DESIRE TO CREATE COMMUNAL DISHARMONY AND CONFLICT, WERE TRYING TO PERSUADE STUDENTS TO BOYCOTT THEIR CLASSES. HE DENIED THAT THE ABOLITION OF STANDARDIZATION WOULD WORK TO THE DETRIMENT OF SINHALESE STUDENTS, PROMISING THAT ANY STUDENT WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN ADMITTED TO A UNIVERSITY

UNDER STANDARDIZATION WOULD NOT BE DEPRIVED OF THAT OPPORTUNITY. THE DECISION TO CLOSE THE SCHOOLS REPORTEDLY WAS MADE ON FEBRUARY 21 AT A CABINET MEETING CHAIRED BY THE PRESIDENT IMMEDIATELY AFTER HE RETURNED FROM THE REGIONAL COMMONWEALTH MEETING IN SYDNEY.

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 00883 02 OF 02 241354Z
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 COLOMBO 0883

8. THE UNIVERSITIES

THE GOVERNMENT CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS DID NOT APPLY TO UNIVERSITIES. AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED, THERE IS LESS OF AN OUTCRY AGAINST STANDARDIZATION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WHO HAVE ALREADY MADE IT OVER THE ENTRY HURDLE. NEVERTHELESS, THE INTER UNIVERSITY STUDENT FEDERATION (IUSF), WHICH IS PROBABLY LEFTIST DOMINATED, CALLED FOR A BOYCOTT OF CLASSES TO TAKE PLACE ON FEBRUARY 23 AND AMONG THE ISSUES PROTESTED WAS STANDARDIZATION. IUSF PROTESTED AGAINST UNIVERSITY ADMISSION SOLELY ON MERIT, SUGGESTING ADMISSION ON STANDARDIZED MARKS, ON A DISTRICT BASIS, AND ON MERIT. THEIR OTHER PROTESTS WERE RELATED TO INSURING THE AUTONOMY OF UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES AND THE RIGHTS OF STUDENTS. UNIVERSITY BOYCOTT TOOK PLACE WITHOUT INCIDENT AND REPORTEDLY INVOLVED 30,000 STUDENTS AT SEVERAL CAMPUSES. UNIVERSITIES WERE BACK TO NORMAL ON FEBRUARY 24. THEY ARE SCHEDULED TO CLOSE FOR THE

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PAGE 02 COLOMB 00883 02 OF 02 241354Z

REGULAR SCHTOL VACATION AT VARIOUS TIMES IN MARCH. THERE IS AS YET NO EVIDENCE OF A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE IUSF AND THE LOWER SCHOOLS' BOYCOTT.

O. THE POLITICAL PLOT

MINISTER OF EDUCATION NISSANKA WIJERATNE TOLD THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FEBRUARY 23 THAT THEY HAD UNCOVERED A PLOT TO TOPPLE THE GOVERNMENT. BY USING STUDENTS TO UNLEASH A WAVE OF VIOLENCE. HE DID NOT

ELABORATE OR PRESENT ANY EVIDENCE. HOWEVER, THREE PERSONS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED FOR ATTEMPTING TO INCITE DISAFFECTION IN ORDER TO BRING ABOUT A CHANGE IN ANY MATTER ESTABLISHED BY LAW OTHER THAN BY LEGAL MEANS.

10. DR. NATH AMARAKONE ONE OF THTSE ARRESTED, WAS SECRETARY TO THE MINISTRY OF HOUSING AND CONSTRUCTION UNDER THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT. HE REPORTEDLY IS NOT A STRONG SUPPORT OF THE SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP) AND HIS WIFE'S FAMILY IS KNOWN TO BE PRO-UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP) BUT HE IS KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN AN ARDENT SINHALESE COMMUNALIST. HOWEVER, V. W. KULARATNE, AN ATTORNEY ALSO ARRESTED ON THE SAME CHARGE, WHO HAS BEEN BUSY AGITATING ON THIS ISSUE IS A MEMBER OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE SLFP AND IS A CLOSE ASSOCIATE OF AMARAKONE'S. MOHANLAL GRERO THE THIRD PERSON TAKEN INTO CUSTODY, IS A LECTURER AT ONE OF THE UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES AND HAS BEEN VIGOROUSLY OPPOSING THE ABOLITION OF STANDARDIZATION.

1. AMARKONE FOUNDED THE RABIDLY PRO-SINHALESE SRI LANKA BUDDHIST FRONT (SLBF) IN 1975 AND HAS LONG ADVOCATED THAT SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF GOVERNMENT JOBS SHOULD BE GIVEN TO BUDDHISTS.
A SECRETLY-DISTRIBUTED CIRCULAR BY THE PATRIOTIC
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PAGE 03 COLOMB 00883 02 OF 02 241354Z

STUDENTS FRONT WAS PRINTED BY THE SLBF, WHICH ALSO PUBLISHES A MONTHLY NEWSPAPER THAT HAS ADVOCATED RETENTION OF STANDARDIZATION.

12. DURING THE WEEKEND OF FEBRUARY 12, SEVERAL LEADING BUDDHISTS REPORTEDLY MET AT AMARKONE'S HOUSE AND FORMED A NEW PARTY, THE UNITED SINHALESE FRONT. THE CID, APPRISED OF THE MEETING, FOLLOWED AMARAKONE'S ACTIVITIES, AND ARRESTED HIM ON FEBRUARY 3.

13. COMMENT: WIGERATNE MAY BE HANGING HIS ALLEGATION OF A POLITICAL PLOT ON THE THREAD CONNECTING THE FORMATION OF A NEW PARTY, THE SLBF, AND THE CIRCULAR CALLING FOR THE STUDENTS' SATYAGRAHA. UNLESS THERE IS MORE THAN APPEARS IN THE PRESS OR THAN WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIND OUT, THERE SEEMS TO BE NO EVIDENCE OF A POLITICAL CONSPIRACY TO TOPPLE THE GOVERNMENT. POLITICAL CONSPIRACY IS ONE OF THE RECURRING REASONS GIVEN FOR POSSIBLY UNPOPULAR ACTIONS BY BOTH UNP AND SLFP GOVERNMENTS. BUT THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT EFFORTS TO EXCITE SINHALESE OPINION WILL INTENSIFY COMMUNAL FEELINGS AND WORK AGAINST THE

PRESENT GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO ASSUAGE TAMIL FEELINGS -
AND ITS POLITICAL POSITION.

14. THERE ARE SEVERAL OTHER POSSIBLE REASONS
WHY THE GOVERNMENT REACTED SO QUICKLY AND STRONGLY IN
THIS INSTANCE. SOME HAVE SPECULATED THAT IT IS A
MEANS OF DEMONSTRATING THAT THE PRESIDENT MEANS BUSINESS
WHEN HE SAYS HE WILL NOT TOLERATE SITUATIONS
THAT MIGHT LEAD TO INSTABILITY, PARTICULARLY
COMMUNAL DIFFICULTIES. THERE WAS PROBABLY TOO THE
LEGITIMATE CONCERN THAT A STUDENT BOYCOTT ON THE
STANDARDIZATION ISSUE COULD HAVE INFLAMED COMMUNAL
PASSIONS. IN THE COMMUNAL CONFRONTATIONS OF AUGUST
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PAGE 04 COLOMB 00883 02 OF 02 241354Z

1977, STILL FRESS IN MANY MINDS, JAYEWARDENE WAS CRITICIZED
FOR NOT HAVING ACTED SOONER AND MORE DECISIVELY TO
BRING THE SITUATION UNDER CONTROL. HE CANNOT BE
ACCUSED OF INDECISIVENESS IN THIS CASE.

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